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"Revolutionary Anniversaries" (2008). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 304.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/304>

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Revolutionary Anniversaries

October 1, 2008 in [This Day in History](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [2 comments](#)

Few Westerners will take note that this week it is time to celebrate Chinese revolutions. October 1 will be the 59th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (celebrated as National Day). Ten days later, on October 10, Taiwan celebrates its National Day (also known as Double Ten Day, and on its 97th go-round). On the mainland, Double Tens is used as an opportunity to commemorate the uprising that overthrew the Qing Dynasty, though not the Republic that followed it. Of course, which one you celebrate depends on location and political leaning, but either way early October is clearly a time for revolutions.

Even so, these aren't the Chinese revolutions that matter in the West. Never mind that the Wuchang Uprising of 1911 is China's Boston Tea Party, nor that 1949 marked the beginning of the greatest increases in rural stability in modern Chinese history (not to overlook the violence of the Mao Era, but in the spirit of early October, we'll focus on triumphal history for the moment). The Chinese revolution that Westerners want to talk about is a failed one—the 1989 student uprising.

Chinese are understandably exasperated with the continued Western fixation on the traumatic Cultural Revolution, as well as, when it comes to anniversaries, the June 4th one linked to 1989. June 4th in particular looms so large in the American imagination partly due to the way the appearance on Tiananmen Square of a Statue of Liberty-like icon links up with our age-old desire to see a democracy like ours spring up in the Middle Kingdom. While many Chinese old enough to remember the uprisings acknowledge that it was a deplorable situation, few wish Wuer Kaixi and the other student leaders had managed to wrest control from the CCP leadership. In fact, the Pew Global Attitudes Project released survey results this summer that show that Chinese are overwhelmingly satisfied with China's current direction—to the tune of 86 percent (the highest of any of the 24 countries surveyed, and markedly above the 23 percent of Americans who felt similarly about the U.S.). Cynics will say that we can't trust a survey from a "closed society," but even accounting for some give in the numbers, many Chinese clearly feel happy about the direction of their nation. Why do these numbers matter in a discussion of the student protests? Because they tell us why 1989 matters.

The student-led protests were in part a broad-minded demonstration of democratic ideals (though other aspirations and grievances than those symbolized by the Goddess of Democracy were in play as well), and this is certainly how they are remembered in the West, with the crackdown seen as symbolizing authoritarian insensitivity at its worst. In China, however, the protests of 1989 are more important as a marker of shifting expectations of the Chinese government. The context that precipitated the demonstrations was pocketbook practicality: in the first decade following Deng Xiaoping's sweeping economic reforms (begun in late 1978), the government began to dismantle its social safety net and one of the first bits to go was guaranteed jobs for university graduates. Coupled with inflation and unpleasant living conditions on university campuses, the calls for increased political participation that had been in the air for almost a decade took on new life.

Following the movement's violent end, there were more practical decisions to be made. Rather than a telegenic and abrupt government overthrow, which might have established a new National Day in June, the Chinese people chose the go-slow approach of increasing wealth (though not for everyone at the same time) and slowly expanding civil rights (though not without periodic retrenchments from time to time). As we have seen this year, in everything from Wen Jiabao's post-earthquake hand-holding tour to calls for increased domestic regulation of Chinese food products to the emergence of a new kind of passive protest called "the stroll," that wealth is slowly but surely translating into increased interest in making government more accountable to the people. There are enormous concerns, both internationally and domestically, with human rights infringements and attempts by the Chinese government to control and manage information, as there should be. However, increasingly it seems, even to some of us who express outrage at specific abusive practices and endemic corruption, that the choice of stability was a prescient one, and one that could lead to a steady expansion of civil rights without the devastating violence of a revolution.

